TODAY'S LECTURE
1/28/09

Logic and Language

The Humpty-Dumpty Argument

Sentences and Propositions

MAGICAL THEORIES OF MEANING

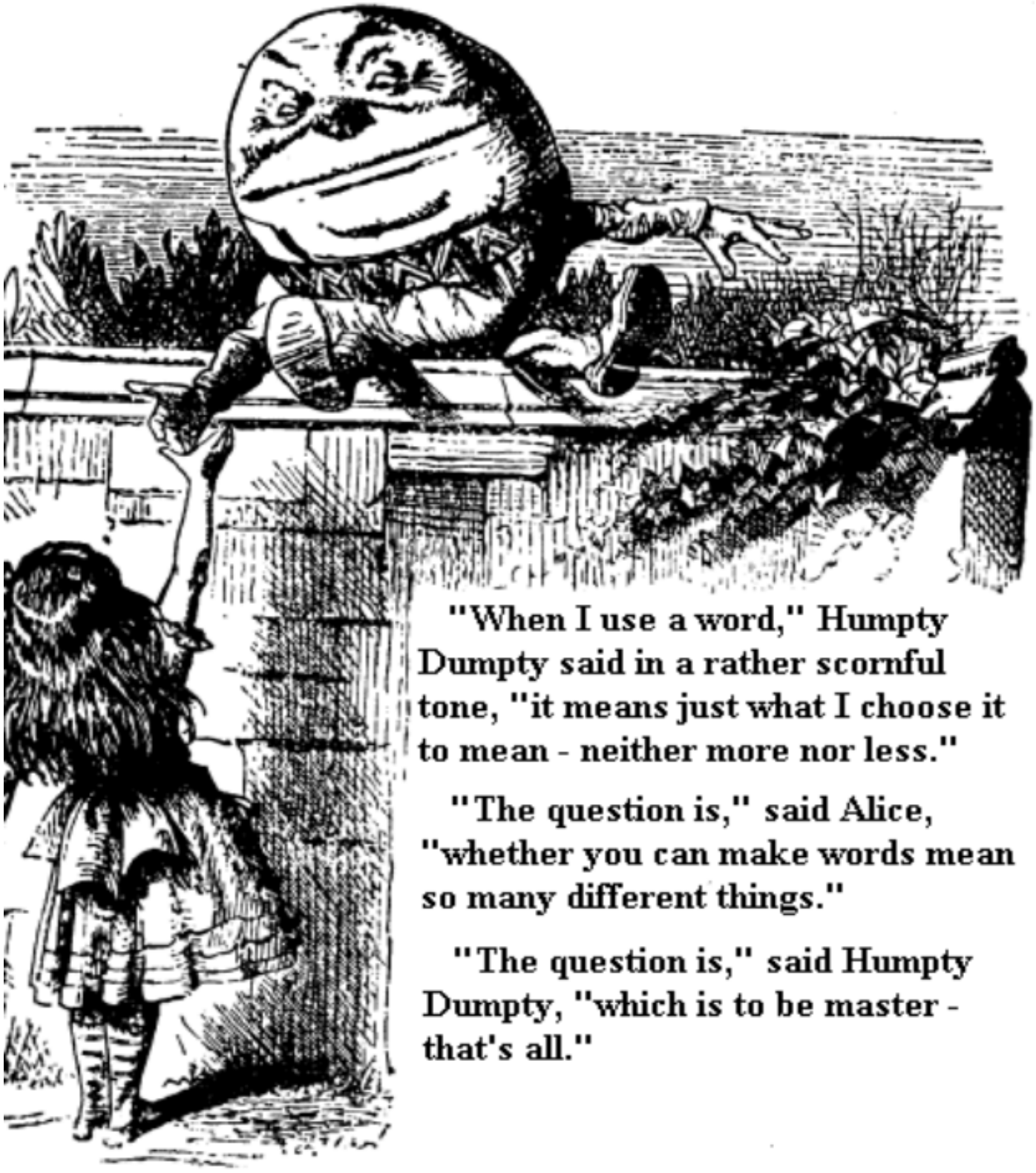
- The simple idea that there is an essential or necessary connection between a word and its meaning or reference.

- Seen most prominently in fiction. E.g. Voldemort is referred to by ‘He-who-can-not-be-named’ . Calling him by his real name is not done casually.

A natural criticism:

The words we use are artifacts of our social and cultural past. They become meaningful insofar as we choose to use them in certain ways.

The relation between word and word meaning is *conventional.* There is no magical connection between the sound ‘dog’ and dogs. We could have collectively decided that ‘dog’ meant pudding.



"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

"The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."

"The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master - that's all."

HUMPTY'S SKEPTICISM

Words/expressions do not have their meanings essentially. The word 'horse‘ could have picked out squids if history had gone a different way.

Words change their meaning throughout time. (‘god-mother’)

The same word can pick out different things. (‘football’)

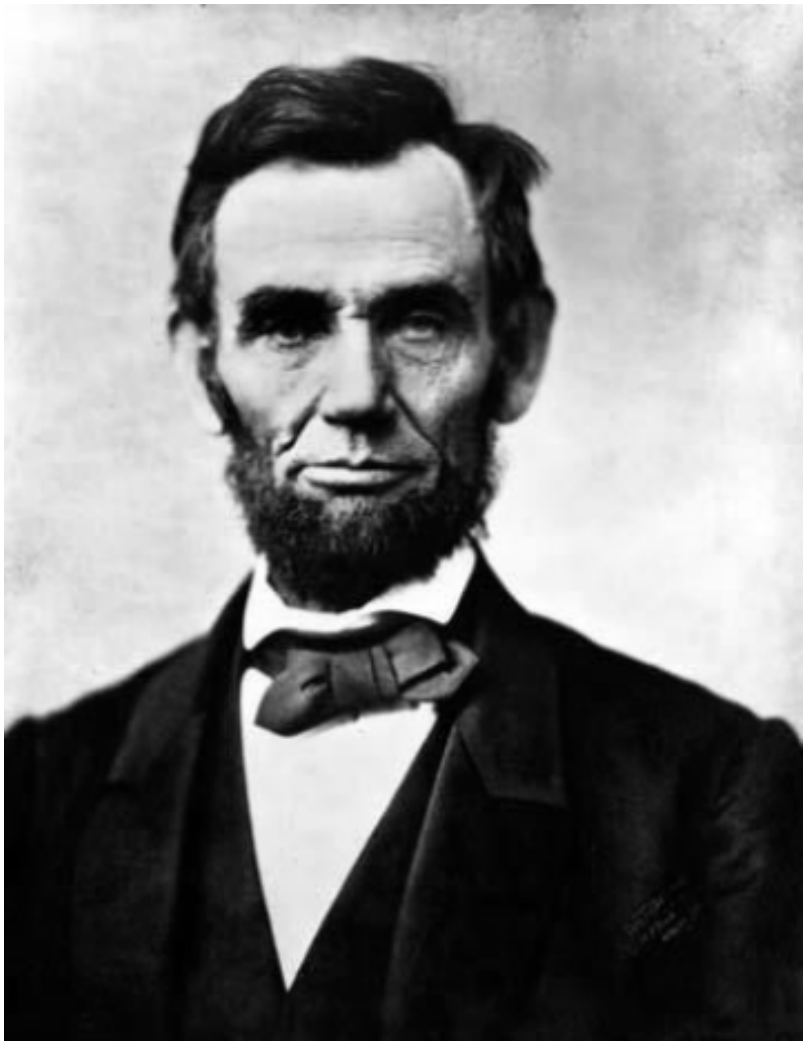
(H) If logic depends on the meanings of words in (our) language, and the connection between words and the world is arbitrary, then there is no fixed notion of truth or validity. It’s all semantic flux.

- Consider this English sentence: Two plus two equals four.
- As it stands it is true, but who is to prevent the word ‘two’ from picking out something besides 2, like 3?
- So 2+2=4 could be false, thus it is not necessarily true.

The concern for us is that this skepticism would also apply to words like ‘valid’, ‘true’, or ‘supports’.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

- Is this really a scenario in which 2 and 2 does not equal 4?
- What is expressed by '2+2=4' after adopting the imagined convention is not even about 2 (the number), it is about the numbers 3 and 4.



How many legs does a dog have if you call the tail a leg?

Four. Calling a tail a leg doesn't make it a leg.

RESPONDING TO HUMPTY

Sentences and Propositions

SENTENCES EXPRESS PROPOSITIONS

Responding to Humpty is easy:

First, distinguish between the sentences we use and the propositions/information they express.

Second, emphasize that the notions surrounding truth (like validity) are about propositions, not the bits of language we use.

THE PICTURE IS ATTRACTIVE, ACCOUNTS FOR:

- Two sentences in different languages can express the same proposition.
  - Snow is white.
  - Schnee ist weiss.
- Two sentences in the same language can express the same proposition.
  - Walter is a bachelor.
  - Walter is an unmarried male.

…AND CONTEXT SENSITIVITY OF LANGUAGE

- Typical context-sensitive expressions: I, you, here, now, over there, yesterday, local etc.

- Utterances of ‘I am hungry’ by two different people will express different propositions.
- ‘Now it is 11:15 pm’ and ‘Now it is 11:15 pm’
- ‘I am Lebowski’ and ‘I am Lebowski’

- Other context-sensitive expressions: tall, heavy, talented . . .

- Consider ‘Alex is tall’ uttered in this class.
- Consider ‘Alex is tall’ uttered while pointing to Alex, among a lineup of basketball players.

THE MAIN IDEA

There is a distinction between the sentences we say and write, and the information or proposition(s) they express.

The relationship between sentences and propositions is many-to-one.

(translations, synonyms)

The relationship between sentences and propositions is also one-to-many.

('I am hungry', 'Now it is 9:40')

THE MORAL

Even though the connection between language and the world is mediated by context and convention, it does not follow that logic is arbitrary.

FOR NEXT TIME

- Read through Chapter 3

- Don’t get bogged down in all the new terminology, we won’t be going through every single concept in the chapter.